ACTFL

Oral Proficiency Interview

Familiarization Workshop

Manual

Table of Contents

What is ACTFL?

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is a national membership organization dedicated to promoting the study of languages and cultures as an integral component of American education and society. ACTFL seeks to provide effective leadership for the improvement of teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. It was established in 1967 by the Modern Language Association. Prior to that time, there was no single society representing teachers of all foreign languages at all educational levels. ACTFL was organized to fill that need.

What are the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines?

The *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* were developed in 1982 and were based on the language skill level descriptions for oral proficiency as used by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR). The *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines,* as opposed to the proficiency guidelines developed by the government, were designed for use in academic environments where distinctions at the very highest levels of proficiency are irrelevant. As a result, the 11-point (0-5) governmental rating scale was adapted to a 9-point scale, and language skill level descriptions were rewritten.

In 1986, after four years of use and study of the provisional guidelines, the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* were published. These revised guidelines present global characterizations of integrated performance in each of the four skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing, arranged in a hierarchical order. Each description is a representative, not an exhaustive, sample of a particular range of ability, and each level subsumes all previous levels.

Because these guidelines identify stages of proficiency*, as opposed to achievement, they are *not* intended to measure what an individual has achieved through specific classroom instruction but rather to allow assessment of what an individual *can* and *cannot* do, regardless of where, when, or how the language has been learned or acquired. These guidelines are *not* based on a particular linguistic theory or pedagogical method, since the guidelines are proficiency-based, as opposed to achievement-based, and are intended to be used for global* assessment.

NOTE: Definitions of words marked with an asterisk can be found in the **Glossary** at the end of this manual.

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, or OPI, as it is often called, is a standardized procedure for the global* assessment of functional* speaking ability, i.e., it measures language production* holistically by determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses. It also establishes a speaker's level of *consistent* functional* ability as well as the clear upper limitations of that ability. This means that an OPI is a testing method that measures how well a person speaks a language by comparing that individual's performance of specific language tasks, not with some other person's performance, but with the criteria for each of the nine proficiency levels described in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking*. Since the OPI is an assessment of *functional* language skills*, it is irrelevant to the tester when, where, why, and under what conditions a speaker being tested learned the language.

Even though performance on the ACTFL OPI is holistically rated, there are five major categories of assessment criteria on which ratings are focused—

- **Global tasks*** or **functions*** performed with the language; for example, asking and answering simple questions, narrating, describing.

- The **contexts*** or sets of circumstances—linguistic or situational—in which these tasks are performed, for example, in a restaurant in Mexico.

- The **content*** areas or topics that relate to these contexts*, for example, ordering a meal.

- The **accuracy*** with which the tasks are performed. Factors included in this category include grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency*, sociolinguistic* appropriateness or acceptability of what is being said within a certain setting, and the use of appropriate strategies for discourse* management.

- The oral **text type*** that results from the performance of the tasks, i.e., discrete words and phrases, sentences, paragraphs*, or extended discourse*.

The ACTFL OPI takes the form of a carefully structured conversation between a trained and certified interviewer and the person whose speaking proficiency is being assessed. A ratable speech sample is elicited from the interviewee by an individually determined series of questions, which follow the established ACTFL protocol of "level checks*" and "probes*." Test candidates are also often asked to take part in a role-play, which presents an opportunity for them to perform linguistic functions that the conversation portion of the interview would not permit. The tape recording of the interview is then independently rated (or evaluated) by the tester and another ACTFL-certified tester before a final oral proficiency rating is assigned.

In summary, the OPI assesses language performance in terms of the *ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in real-life situations.*

The rating scale used for assessing how well a speaker performs on the ACTFL OPI spans a wide range of performance profiles—from those of beginning learners to those who are able to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract* topics.

The criteria on which ratings are based are arranged hierarchically. There are four major levels of performance on the OPI rating scale, ranging from the lowest (**Novice**) level to the highest (**Superior**). [See **Figure 1**] Following are the characteristics of each of these four levels.

Major Borders

Novice Level — characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned (memorized*) material. Novice-level speakers tend to speak using isolated words in lists or in "chunks."
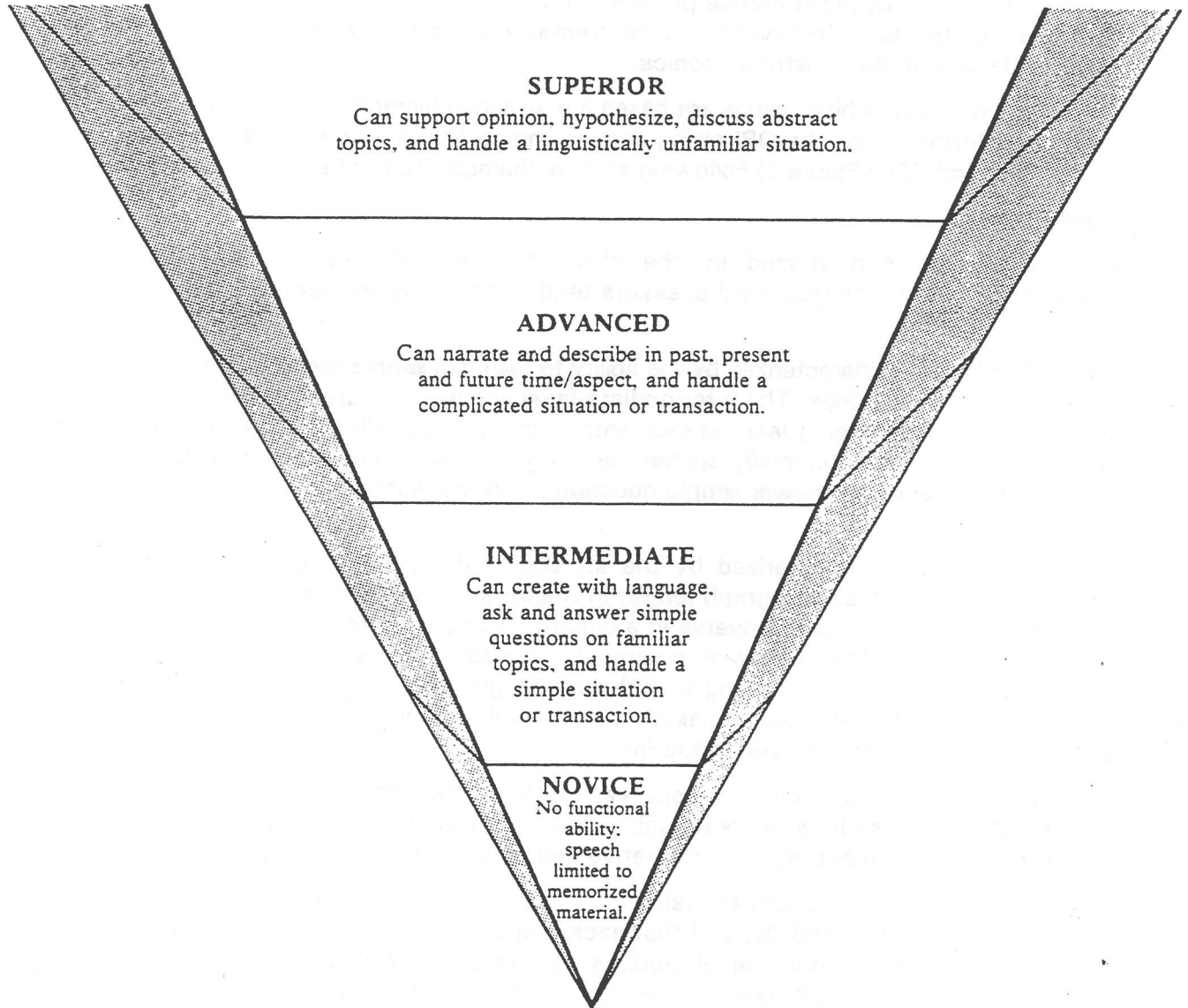
Intermediate Level — characterized by the ability **to maintain simple face-to-face conversations in highly predictable settings**. The intermediate-level speaker can **create** with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, although basically as a reaction to what has been said; can **initiate, minimally sustain,** and **close basic communicative tasks** in a simple manner; and can **ask and answer simple questions**. Intermediate-level speakers tend to speak in **sentences**.

Advanced Level — characterized by the speaker's ability to **narrate and describe using connected discourse* of paragraph length in major time frames**—past, present, and future. Advance level speakers can converse in a clearly participatory fashion; **initiate, sustain,** and **bring to a close a wide variety of communicative tasks**, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication* or an unforeseen turn of events. Speakers at this level are able to **satisfy the requirements of many general school and/or work situations**.

Superior Level — characterized by the speaker's ability to participate effectively in **most formal and informal conversations** on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and to **support opinion** and **hypothesize** using native-like vocabulary and discourse* strategies.

It is extremely important to realize that this rating scale **presumes that facility with a language increases exponentially,** and that **each major level subsumes the criteria of the level below it.** Being rated at a given level requires **sustained performance** of the tasks required at that level. Strong Intermediate level speakers are often able to include some description* and narration* in their speech, but only speakers who can *sustain* description* and narration* on a *number* of topics involving *different* time references can be rated at the Advanced level.

Figure 1. Inverted Pyramid Showing Major Levels of the ACTFL Rating Scale

SUPERIOR
Can support opinion. hypothesize, discuss abstract topics, and handle a linguistically unfamiliar situation.

ADVANCED
Can narrate and describe in past. present and future time/aspect, and handle a complicated situation or transaction.

INTERMEDIATE
Can create with language. ask and answer simple questions on familiar topics. and handle a simple situation or transaction.

NOVICE
No functional ability: speech limited to memorized material.

Minor Borders

There are sublevels that have been established to enable us to differentiate progress within the four major ranges. These sublevels address the non-linear improvements in speech performance that come with *conceptual awareness*, followed by *partial control*, and ultimately by *full control* of particular rules or features of the language studied. [See **Figure 2**]

"High" sublevels contain speech performance with **considerable evidence of the features of the next higher major functional level.** Although those features are present more than half of the time, they **are not sustained** throughout the speech sample. High sublevels are established for Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels. [**NOTE:** The term **Advanced High** corresponds to **Advanced Plus** in earlier proficiency guidelines, manuals, and publications. This change dos not reflect a change in definition or criteria.]

"Low" and *"Mid"* sublevels exist for the Novice and Intermediate levels of proficiency only. A given rating level subsumes a *range* of language use, with the range widening as one progresses on the scale. A learner receiving formal instruction might well be assigned the same *major level* rating at the beginning and end of an instructional program. The Low and Mid sublevel ranges were defined particularly for learners in academic settings in order to show progress within these two lower major functional* categories (Novice and Intermediate). Low and Mid performances, separated by **level-** or **range-internal** minor borders, differ from each other in terms of the **quantity** (Novice and Intermediate levels) as well as the **quality** (Intermediate level) of language with which a certain task is performed.
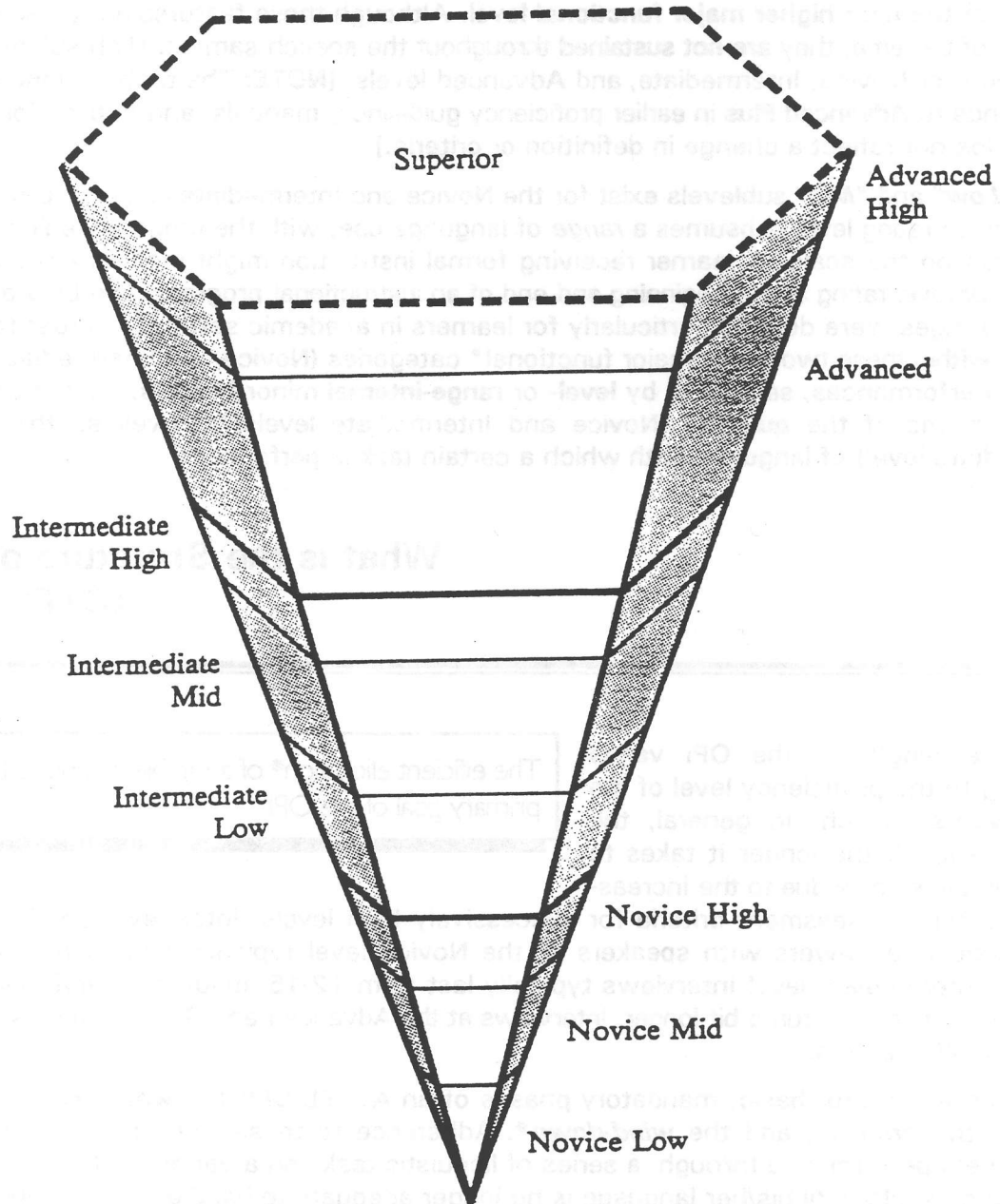
What is the Structure of the ACTFL OPI?

The length of the OPI varies according to the proficiency level of the interviewee's speech. In general, the higher the level, the longer it takes to elicit a ratable sample due to the increas-

> The efficient elicitation* of a ratable sample is the primary goal of the OPI.

ingly extensive assessment criteria for successively high levels. Interviews conducted by experienced interviewers with speakers at the Novice level typically last fewer than ten minutes. Intermediate level interviews typically last from 12-15 minutes; interviews at the Intermediate High level run a bit longer. Interviews at the Advanced and Superior levels usually require 20-25 minutes.

There are four basic, mandatory phases of an ACTFL OPI: the *warm-up**, the *level checks**, the *probes**, and the *wind-down**. Adherence to these four phases guides the intervewee's performance through a series of linguistic tasks on a variety of topics, moving up the rating scale until his/her language is no longer adequate to handle the communicative challenges presented. Each phase also has a specific purpose with regard to the interviewee's reaction to the various phases of the OPI process and to the fact that the speech sample is

Figure 2. Inverted Pyramid Representing the ACTFL Rating Scale
with Major Ranges and Sublevels

Superior

Advanced
High

Advanced

Intermediate
High

Intermediate
Mid

Intermediate
Low

Novice High

Novice Mid

Novice Low

going to be evaluated. While the interviewer's primary task in the OPI is to get a ratable speech sample, another important goal is to leave the interviewee with a sense of accomplishment. [See **Figure 3**]

WARM-UP*

The first phase of the OPI is the **warm-up*** which serves as the introduction to the interview. On the psychological level, the warm-up* helps the interviewee feel comfortable and confident, allowing time to adjust to speaking the language and to become accustomed to the interviewer's pronunciation and way of speaking. On the linguistic level, this phase consists of greetings, informal exchanges of pleasantries, and basic conversation openers, pitched at the Intermediate level, and quickly raised or lowered to a level that appears comfortable for the interviewee. More importantly, the interviewee's responses in the warm-up* phase provide the first evidence for a preliminary assessment of his/her probable level of proficiency.
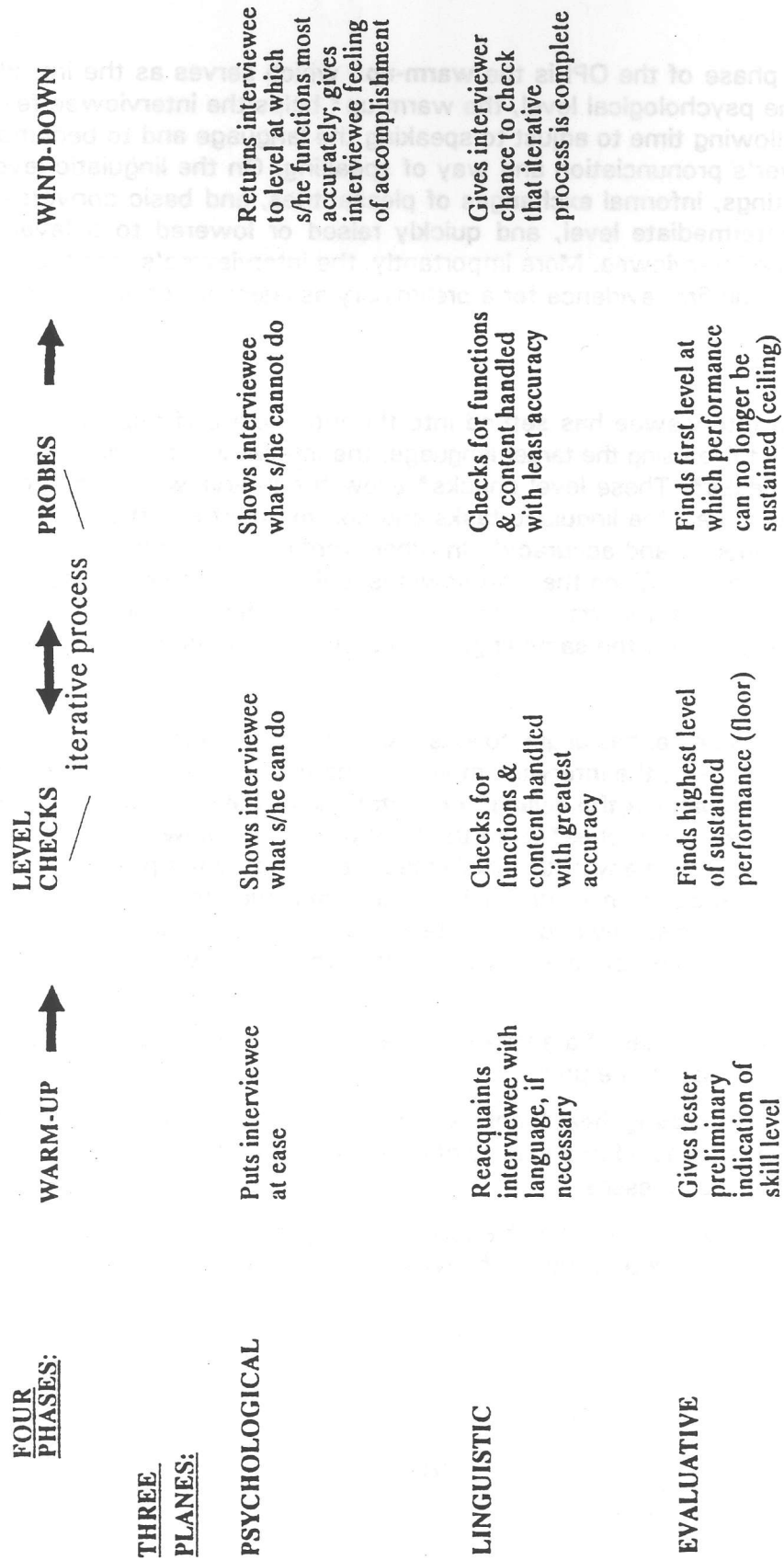
LEVEL CHECKS*

When the interviewee has settled into the interview and appears to be reasonably relaxed and comfortable using the target language, the interviewer moves to phase two of the OPI—the **level checks***. These level checks* allow the interviewee to demonstrate his/her performance floor*, i.e., the linguistic tasks and contexts* of a particular level that can be handled with confidence and accuracy*. In other words, the interviewee now has a chance to **demonstrate strengths**. Since the interviewer is looking for a *representative* sample of the interviewee's speech, it is important to touch on several different topics during the course of the interview—to check for the same linguistic functions on a variety of topics.

PROBES*

Once the interviewer has begun to establish that the speaker can handle the tasks and topics of a particular level, the interview moves to the next phase, the **probes***. The purpose of the probes* is **to discover the ceiling* or limitations of the interviewee's proficiency**, i.e., the patterns of weakness. Probes* raise the level of the interview to the next major level. If the interviewee can't handle any of the challenges presented by the probes* at the next level, the earlier level explored is, in all probability, the proficiency level of the interviewee. If all probes* are handled consistently and accurately, the interviewer's level check* was too low. In this case, probes* then become level checks* for the new level, and a new series of probes* is presented.

- Note that these phases of the interview—**level checks*** and **probes***—are repeated and alternated at least three times.

- **Never trust anything heard only once**. It is important to make sure that earlier assessment is reflected in a variety of contexts*, and that there is indeed a *pattern* of strengths or weaknesses.

- When the interviewee reaches the ceiling* or limitation of his/her proficiency, **linguistic breakdown*** occurs and the interviewer is unable to complete the task effectively.

Figure 3. General OPI Structure: Phases and Planes of the OPI

FOUR PHASES: WARM-UP →   LEVEL CHECKS ↕ (iterative process) PROBES ↑   WIND-DOWN ↑

THREE PLANES:

	WARM-UP	LEVEL CHECKS	PROBES	WIND-DOWN
PSYCHOLOGICAL	Puts interviewee at ease	Shows interviewee what s/he can do	Shows interviewee what s/he cannot do	Returns interviewee to level at which s/he functions most accurately; gives interviewee feeling of accomplishment
LINGUISTIC	Reacquaints interviewee with language, if necessary	Checks for functions & content handled with greatest accuracy	Checks for functions & content handled with least accuracy	Gives interviewer chance to check that iterative process is complete
EVALUATIVE	Gives tester preliminary indication of skill level	Finds highest level of sustained performance (floor)	Finds first level at which performance can no longer be sustained (ceiling)	

- When adequate level checks* and probes* have been conducted and when evidence clearly points to a particular level of proficiency, **role-plays** or **situations** are introduced into the interview. The purpose of the role-play is to check whether the interviewee can carry out linguistic functions that cannot be easily elicited by means of a conversational exchange. Role-plays are introduced only when the interviewee's performance indicates at least the Intermediate level of proficiency, but they can be used for ratings of Novice-High in order to make a clear determination between Novice-High or Intermediate-Low performance.

WIND-DOWN*

The purpose of the **wind-down*** phase is primarily psychological—it allows the interviewee to return to a comfortable level of proficiency and end the OPI on a positive note. The ACTFL OPI must include an adequate wind-down*, since what immediately precedes may have been difficult for the interviewee.

What Assessment Criteria are Used?

It is important to remember that the OPI is an **integrative** test—it addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and looks at them from a global perspective rather than from the point of view of the presence or absence of any given linguistic feature. As mentioned earlier, in evaluating a speech sample, the following criteria are considered: [See **Figure 4**]

- the **functions*** or **global tasks*** the interviewee performs;
- the **specific content areas*** in which the interviewee is able to perform them;
- the **social contexts*** in which the interviewee is able to perform them;
- the **accuracy*** or **precision** with which these tasks are accomplished; and
- the **type of oral text** or **discourse*** the interviewee is capable of producing.

Following are very brief descriptions of each of these five criteria.

FUNCTIONS*/GLOBAL TASKS*

Superior	can discuss extensively by abstracting, supporting opinions, and hypothesizing
Advanced	can describe and narrate in past, present, and future time
Intermediate	can maintain simple face-to-face conversations by asking and responding to simple questions
Novice	can communicate only minimally with formulaic and rote utterances, lists, and enumerations

CONTENT*

Superior	wide range of concrete* and abstract* general interest topics and some special fields of interest and expertise

Figure 4. Assessment Criteria: Speaking Proficiency

Global Tasks/Functions	Context	Content	Accuracy	Text Type
SUPERIOR Can discuss extensively by supporting opinions, abstracting and hypothesizing	Most formal and informal settings	Wide range of general interest topics and some special fields of interest and expertise; concrete, abstract and unfamiliar topics	Errors virtually never interfere with communication or disturb the native speaker	Extended discourse
ADVANCED Can describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames	Most informal and some formal settings	Concrete and factual topics of personal and public interest	Can be understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to non-native speakers	Paragraph discourse
INTERMEDIATE Can maintain simple face-to-face conversation by asking and responding to simple questions	Some informal settings and a limited number of transactional situations	Topics related primarily to self and immediate environment	Can be understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to non-native speakers	Discrete sentences and strings of sentences
NOVICE Can produce only formulaic utterances, lists and enumerations	Highly predictable common daily settings	Common discrete elements of daily life	May be difficult to understand, even for those accustomed to non-native speakers	Discrete words and phrases

Advanced	concrete* and factual topics of personal and general interest
Intermediate	topics mostly related to self and immediate environment
Novice	common discrete aspects of daily life

CONTEXT*

Superior	most formal and informal settings, i.e., professional, business, social situations
Advanced	most informal and some formal settings
Intermediate	some informal settings and a limited number of social transactions
Novice	highly predictable common daily settings

ACCURACY*

Superior	errors virtually never interfere with communication* or disturb the native speaker
Advanced	can be understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-native speakers
Intermediate	can be understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers
Novice	may be difficult to understand, even for speakers accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers

TEXT TYPE*

Superior	extended discourse*
Advanced	paragraphs*
Intermediate	discrete sentences
Novice	individual words and phrases

What Strategies are Used to Elicit Speech?

> The choice of a question depends on the function it elicits within the overall interview.

QUESTION TYPES

The following discussion sequences different types of questions roughly by proficiency levels:

Yes/No Questions   **Example:** Do you have any pets?

These are questions that require no more than a "yes" or a "no" answer. These questions are good confidence builders, particularly in the warm-up* phrase of the interview. They can also be used to explore the availability and appropriateness of new topics. Too many yes/no questions make the interview seem an interrogation and elicit virtually no speech sample. It is best to limit the use of yes/no questions.

Alternative Questions   **Example:** Do you have a dog or a cat?

With alternative questions, a choice is provided, typically between two alternatives. The respondent simply selects one of the two, most often by repeating the wording. These questions tend to indicate listening comprehension and the ability to recycle small bits of language. They can be used, however, to help delimit a large topic and direct the interviewee's attention to selected aspects of the topic. Without follow-up, these questions often result in short answers in which the linguistic information was provided by the interviewer. They should be used sparingly.

Fact and Information Questions   **Examples:** Where did you get your pet?
                                                         What is his/her name?
                                                         Why do you have a pet?
                                                How does your mom like him/her?

These questions contain an interrogative word and cannot be answered by "yes" or "no." Certain interrogative words call for relatively brief answers: *where, when, what, which, how much, how many.* Other interrogative words call for more open-ended answers: *how* and *why.* These questions encourage interviewees to produce speech beyond the forms used by the interviewer, and can be considered a staple of the OPI. It is important to be careful of questions that require only specific factual answers: use them to open topics and follow them with more open-ended questions.

Intonation Questions   **Example:** Your cat is 15 years old?

These questions turn statements into questions solely by means of an interrogative intonation pattern. Such questions occur commonly in everyday conversations to signal surprise or disbelief. They encourage the candidate to give more information about something that has already been said, and are, therefore, a very positive way to elicit additional speech. They do, however, permit short (even yes/no) answers.

Statements with Question Tags   **Example:** Pets can play a very important
                                                          role in one's life, can't they?

By adding a question tag to a statement, the conversational partner takes a position regarding the contents of the statement. This question then elicits a position from the candidate—agreement or disagreement. Such questions can, however, appear confrontational and should be used judiciously, especially at the lower levels when interviewees do not have the linguistic ability to explain circumstances in detail or defend their positions. They can also elicit simple yes/no answers. They, too, should be used sparingly, except as an entry into another kind of question.

Requests and Polite Requests   **Example:** Please tell me something about your pet.
                                                     Could you tell me a bit more about your pet?
                                                              A dog, huh? Tell me about him.

These are direct requests or commands that have been softened considerably through the use of various markers—intonation, the use of modals, formulas of politeness. Such requests soften the interviewer's role and make the exchange more conversational, thereby encouraging the interviewee's response.

Prelude Questions

Example: You mentioned that you have a dog and a cat. Could you tell me little more about them?

In a prelude questions, the interviewer makes a brief statement that is used to set the stage for the topic or issue that is that real focus of the inquiry. These questions refer to prior content of the interview and explore it in greater detail. They can also be used to introduce a topic and clarify the intended focus, the issue involved, and the depth and detail desired. They should not, however, become too lengthy since they can confuse the interviewee.

Hypothetical Questions

Example: If someone were to offer you another pet, would you accept it?

Hypothetical questions address an unreal condition or projected set of circumstances. They are particularly useful for probing or checking Superior level proficiency.

Rephrased Questions

Example: [Question] Could you describe your daily activities to me?
[Rephrased] What do you do each day?

Although not really a question type, rephrased questions are part of an interviewer's elicitation* strategies. They may be used at all levels to assure comprehension. The danger exists that rephrasing will occur too quickly and too often, resulting in the loss of important evidence about higher level language use on the speaker's part.

CAUTIONARY NOTES

There are a number of interviewer behaviors that are not conducive to an efficient and effective OPI.

> Skilled interviewers obtain a ratable sample of speech while providing, through the manner in which speech is elicited, a feeling of naturalness, support, and genuine interest in the interviewee.

Interviewers *should not*

✗ slow down their speech or exaggerate their enunciation. An OPI is supposed to replicate natural conversational behavior.

✗ be preoccupied with form and correctness. Such preoccupation tends to exaggerate prejudgments of the interviewee's strengths and weaknesses.

✗ echo and correct responses. This is a typical classroom behavior, but the OPI is **not** the time for teaching. Incorrect usage* should simply be noted as part of the overall data for the rating.

✗ furnish vocabulary or finish utterances, since the OPI is supposed to ascertain the interviewee's language abilities as conclusively as possible.

✗ rush the response time. Insufficient response opportunity jeopardizes the interviewee's best performance.

✗ ask display questions, i.e., questions to which the interviewer already knows the answer.

✗ overuse yes/no questions and change topics too frequently. This does not encourage candidates to explore topics in depth and demonstrate an ability to handle lengthier discourse*.

✗ criticize or evaluate the accuracy of information, especially with higher-level speakers.

✗ monopolize the conversation. It is the interviewee, *not* the interviewer who is providing the speech sample.

THE ROLE-PLAY

The role-play is an elicitation* technique that ensures the ratability of the speech sample by eliciting aspects of an interviewee's performance that have not emerged during the conversational portion of the OPI. A role-play is not necessary at Novice Low and Mid levels; it is **advisable at Novice High**, and **mandatory at the Intermediate and Advanced levels.** It is usually placed in the final third or quarter of the OPI, after the interviewer has already moved, in more natural conversation, through a series of level checks* and probes* and needs confirmation of the presumed rating. Placing the role-play toward the end of the OPI allows the interviewer to select a situation designed to add significant information to the speech sample; the activity usually confirms the level of proficiency demonstrated so far in the earlier parts of the OPI and completes the necessary sampling of communicative functions*.

Most often the role-play is set up in the speaker's native language, or at least in a language other than the one being tested. This is to avoid providing the interviewee with vocabulary items or grammatical constructions that might reasonably be expected to be produced spontaneously.

The interviewer should initiate the role-play by taking the first turn, thereby establishing control of the interview at the outset and setting the tone for what is to happen. From then on, it is up to the interviewee to demonstrate the ability to initiate, sustain, and conclude the exchange. Depending on the speaker's performance, the interviewer can contrive to lower the level of language needed to get through the situation, maintain the level as suggested by the role-play card itself, or, by introducing additional complications*, raise the level of difficulty.

The success of the role-play depends in large part on the ability of the interviewer to get into his/her role without dominating the role-play and especially to abandon all teacher behaviors and adhere to a realistic, culturally authentic exchange.

The Role-Play at the Intermediate Level

At the Intermediate level the tasks checked by role-playing include initiating, sustaining, and concluding a conversation involving simple transactional and tourist-type situations that would be appropriate for students at all levels of study—middle, junior high, high school levels, as well as at the college/university level, e.g., asking directions, ordering meals, purchasing essential items, even making travel and lodging arrangements. The role-play is an ideal vehicle for assessing an interviewee's ability to carry out these tasks. Since it is often quite difficult to elicit questions from interviewees during the conversational phase of the interview, the role-play is an excellent opportunity to elicit performance of this communicative task.

Do's and Don't's

ELICITATION*

DO
- ✓ use minimal verbal and non-verbal encouragers
- ✓ respond with interest to what the interviewee is saying
- ✓ press for details at the Intermediate level and above
- ✓ act like a monolingual speaker of the target language
- ✓ cultivate the art of waiting, being patient rather than immediately repeating or paragraphing*
- ✓ speak at a normal rate of speech until it becomes clear that the candidate cannot deal with that rate of speech

DON'T
- ✗ correct the interviewee's grammar or information
- ✗ teach by providing vocabulary or "coaching"
- ✗ encourage use of the native language
- ✗ talk about your own experiences or opinions
- ✗ interrupt unless necessary
- ✗ talk about the OPI process itself
- ✗ jump from topic to topic
- ✗ make evaluative statements about the interviewee's language
- ✗ use "foreigner" talk
- ✗ allow the interviewee to take control of the OPI
- ✗ ask many yes/no questions or either/or questions

EVALUATION

DO
- ✓ ask yourself if the sample is ratable
- ✓ look for patterns of strength and weakness
- ✓ listen "beneath the flow" of the speech
- ✓ listen to the entire OPI before assigning a final rating
- ✓ include all assessment criteria in the final rating
- ✓ determine the "floor*" features of the sample
- ✓ determine the "ceiling*" features of the sample
- ✓ ask yourself again if you still think it's a ratable sample

DON'T
- ✗ compare one speaker's performance to that of another
- ✗ judge on the factual or other information content of the interviewee's utterances
- ✗ assign a rating without listening to the entire taped OPI
- ✗ assume that all silences are negative evidence

How is the Sample Rated?

The following checklists may be used by raters, in conjunction with the level descriptions in the *Guidelines*, to determine a rating.

1. What is the *range* of the performance? (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior)

2. Are the *floor** and the *ceiling** of the performance clearly established?

3. Are all *phases* of the interview present?

4. Was the interviewee given an appropriate *role-play*?

5. Does the interview include enough *content** areas?

6. Can anything be deduced from the *silences* or hesitations* of the speaker? Do the silences allow the interviewee time to *think* and *organize* a response, or do they indicate *linguistic breakdown**?

Once the range has been determined, more detailed questions are asked in conjunction with the level descriptions to arrive at the Low, Mid, or High rating. The following guide should not replace reference to the *Guidelines*, but rather serve as a checklist and an overview in the rating process.

NOVICE-LOW AND NOVICE-MID

Can the speaker...
- ○ speak primarily in isolated words and memorized* phrases?
- ○ be understood, often with difficulty, primarily by persons accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers?
- ○ not yet deal with simple social or transactional tasks?

NOVICE-HIGH

Can the interviewee...
- ○ carry out the tasks of the Intermediate level but not consistently?
- ○ create with the language to convey personalized information more than half of the time?
- ○ ask some questions?
- ○ frequently speak in sentences, albeit very simple ones?

INTERMEDIATE-LOW AND INTERMEDIATE-MID

Can the interviewee...
- ○ create with the language, combining and recombining learned material to provide personal information?
- ○ speak in sentences on a variety of familiar topics?
- ○ ask questions?
- ○ initiate, sustain, and conclude a simple social or transactional task?
- ○ be generally understood, with some repetition, by those accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers?

The Novice High speaker...

- uses not just isolated words and memorized phrases but lists of words and recombined phrases;
- asks some simple questions (mostly formulaic*) and answers simple questions, but relies heavily on learned material;
- sometimes speaks in simple sentences;
- shows signs of spontaneity in language, but relies heavily on the help of the interlocutor;
- conveys personalized information only part of the time;
- controls a very limited vocabulary (objects, places, kinships);
- prefers to resort to learned utterances rather than struggle to find more personal and appropriate expressions;
- makes frequent errors when leaving memorized material, and becomes consequently more difficult to understand;
- uses mostly present tense and rarely attempts other tenses except in rote expressions;
- is understood with difficulty by a sympathetic listener used to foreigners.

The difference between a Novice High and an Intermediate Low speaker is a question of personalization, creation, and control. The Novice High may have as much vocabulary and linguistic knowledge as the Intermediate Low, but lacks the confidence of ability to use them for self-expression. The Novice High can perform many of the Intermediate tasks, but cannot create consistently in the target language. The Novice High speaker is more at ease staying within the comfort zone of learned material than in venturing into new territory, where language has to be wrestled into new shapes to convey new meaning. The Novice High performs the Intermediate functions more than half the time, but still cannot initiate, sustain, and conclude simple social or transactional tasks on a consistent basis. (The Novice High shows the "mesa" landscape in which the valleys are the basic Novice functions, content, context, etc., and the plateaux are the Intermediate functions, content, context, etc. [See **Figure 5**].

The Intermediate Level

The Intermediate level (Mid and Low) is characterized by the ability to create in the target language by recombining learned elements into sentence-length messages in simple face-to-face conversation.

The Intermediate speaker...

- asks and answers simple questions;
- interacts in informal face-to-face transactions requiring little sociolinguistic*/ relational skill (purchasing; getting/giving information on time, directions, place);
- handles simple and well-defined situations with no complications* involved (obtaining services; getting/giving biographical information);
- deals with a variety of topics primarily related to self and immediate environment;
- uses high-frequency, concrete* and personal vocabulary;
- uses discrete sentences and sometimes strings of sentences;
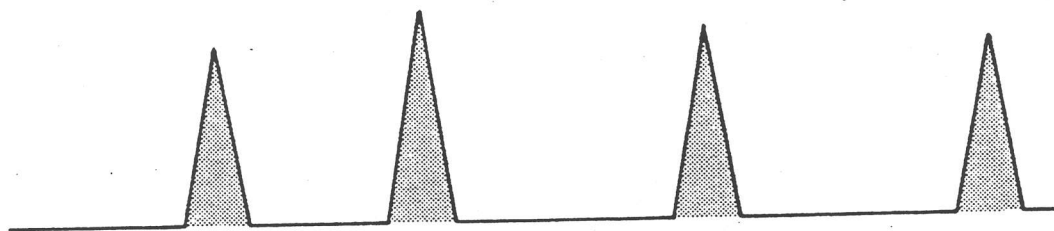- frequently gropes for words and language forms, so speech is rather spasmodic;

Figure 5. Performance Landscapes
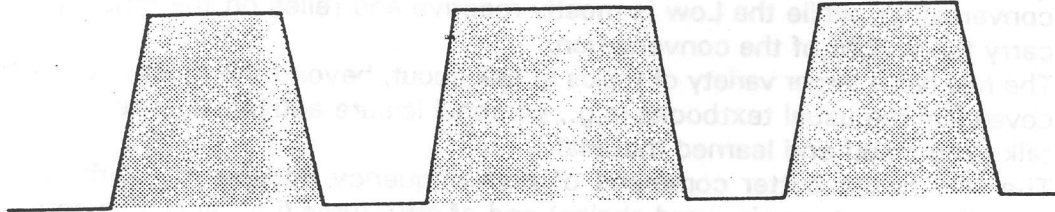
"Mesa" landscape typical of High sublevel
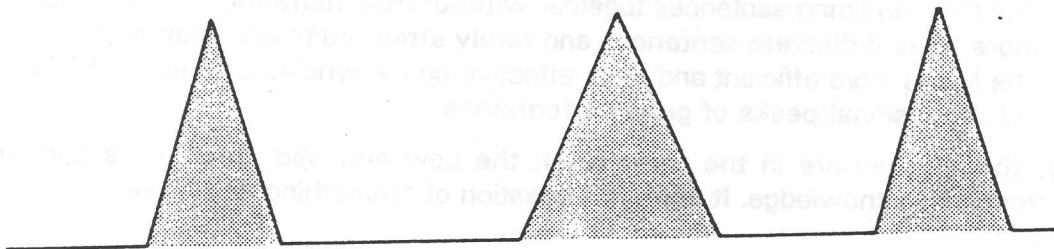
"Mountain" landscape typical of Mid sublevel

"Peak" landscape typical of Low sublevel

- has only partial control of frequently used grammatical structures;
- uses mostly present tense with some control but attempts to use other tenses, particularly the past;
- can be understood by a sympathetic listener used to foreigners (especially Americans).

The difference between an Intermediate Low and and Intermediate Mid speaker is a matter of *quantity* and *quality*; there is no real difference in functional* ability. It is a question of just "how much" and "how well." Here are some indicators:

- The Mid participates more fully in the exchange, initiates and sustains the conversation, while the Low is mostly reactive and relies on the other speaker to carry the weight of the conversation.
- The Mid has a larger variety of topics to talk about, beyond the most obvious topics covered in the usual textbooks (e.g., personal leisure activities), whereas the Low talks about self and learned material.
- The Mid has a better command of high-frequency vocabulary (with sparks of occasional exactness in word choice) and of structures (i.e., adjective agreement; irregular present tense verbs) and uses a wider variety of forms (e.g., more verbs in the past when asked to narrate), but may appear more hesitant because he/she is aware that there is a better way to say it, whereas the Low is more comfortable using just what he/she has learned.
- The Mid can string sentences together without truly narrating, while the Low tends more toward discrete sentences and rarely attempts to link them together.
- The Mid is more efficient and more effective on the whole, whereas the Low shows only occasional peaks of good performance.

Obviously, though they are in the same level, the Low and Mid represent a spectrum of abilities/performances/knowledge. It really is a question of "something and okay" versus "more and better."

The following selected items are intended as operating definitions in the context of the OPI procedure only and should not be construed as full definitions in the linguistic sense. Many are adapted from David Crystal's *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 2nd ed., London, Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Abstract [topics] — topics dealing with ideas and concepts, hypotheses, desires, supported opinions, for example.

Accuracy — the ability to adhere to the rules of the sound system, vocabulary, structures, and grammar to observe the culturally correct and basic standards of the target language.

Ceiling [also known as *Performance ceiling*] — the limitations of a performance as demonstrated by the tasks that are beyond the interviewee's ability to perform well, consistently, or at all.

Communication — the transmission of information (a message) between a source and a receiver using a system such as language.

Complication — opposing viewpoints or goals on the part of the communicating partners, or some unforeseen turn of events which keeps a situation from being routine or highly predictable and necessitates resolution by more extensive linguistic means.

Concrete [topics] — topics dealing with people, places, things, as perceived by the senses.

Content — themes or topics of conversation.

Context [also known as *Situational context*] — the circumstances or settings in which a speaker uses language.

Description — the ability to produce a cohesive oral representation of qualities or features characterizing a given object, place, person, etc.

Discourse — a continuous stretch of language longer than a sentence, of at least paragraph length.

Elicitation — the method of obtaining reliable linguistic data from speakers.

Extended discourse — See also *Discourse* and *Paragraph*.

Floor [also known as *Performance floor*] — the linguistic operations the interviewee can perform with consistent success and accuracy.

Fluency — rate of delivery and coherence of the message.

Formulaic language — fixed, stereotyped utterances used in routine social situations.

Functions — refers to what people are able to do with the language; also called *task universals* [See also *Global tasks*]

Functional (language) — language which successfully communicates ideas.

Global score — a single score assigned to performance on a test of general language proficiency [see *Proficiency test*].

Global tasks — those communicative tasks that have been identified as the key criteria for a given level of proficiency. [See also *Functions*]

Level check — phase two of the OPI that allow the interviewee to demonstrate his/her performance floor*.

Linguistic breakdown — the point at which the interviewee's language ability is insufficient for completing the global task/function in a given context.

Memorized [learned] material — material presented by a speaker which has been learned in the form in which it is used and which the speaker is unable to alter.

Narration — the ability to produce an oral account of an event or incident.

Paragraph — represents a coherent presentation of a small number of sentences, tied together by logic, structure, and function, such as narration of an event and/or description of a person, object, or set of circumstances.

Probe — phase of an OPI that alternates with the Level Checks*; help discover the ceiling* or limitations (patterns of weakness) of the interviewee's proficiency.

Production — the process of planning and executing speech acts.

Proficiency test — a test which measures general language ability rather than a specific body of material such as that presented in a textbook, program, or course of instruction.

Sociolinguistic appropriateness or acceptability — the speaker's ability to adhere to social and cultural rules of use. It addresses whether what is being said is acceptable in a particular language and in a particular setting.

Task universals — See *Functions*.

Text type — a language unit with a definable communicative function, from individual words to extended discourse.

Usage — the collective term for the speech of a language community.

Warm-up — the first, introductory phase of an OPI, that helps the interviewee feel comfortable and confident psychologically and linguistically.

Wind-down — the last phase of the OPI, allowing the interviewee to return to a comfortable level of proficiency and end the OPI on a positive note.